

Nicasio land returned to Native hands

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The Coast Miwok Tribal Council of Marin has purchased a \$1.3 million Nicasio property after a fundraiser that came down to the wire, consummating the first Native land return in Marin history.

With just hours to go, the council cleared a June 20 fundraising goal to purchase a 26-acre property nestled in the Nicasio Valley near the end of Old Rancheria Road. It closed the deal on Monday.

The council plans to use the land to preserve Coast Miwok cultural and spiritual traditions, offer educational programs and share Indigenous best practices of land restoration and soil resiliency with greater Marin County. It has no plans to develop housing on the property but will eventually build a sweat lodge and roundhouse where it can conduct dances and ceremonies.

“I think we’ve created some history with the first land buy-back in Marin County,” said Joe Sanchez, a tribal council elder and San Mateo County resident. “This is our native land. This is like returning home. It’s a great feeling.”

The council raised more than \$1.6 million, with \$650,000 arriving in its bank account on the final day of its fundraising campaign. It drew sizeable donations from a handful of private foundations and more than 80 smaller individual donations, including one from two Lagunitas School students who chipped in their savings when their parents contributed to the campaign.

The property, at 1800 Old Rancheria Road, is located near a site where the Huukuiko people, as they were originally known, lived for centuries in one of the last known Miwok settlements, ʼEtcha Tamal.

The council had been searching for a property for months before it learned that the Nicasio property was for sale in late April. It offered the \$1.3 million asking price, and the owners, Peter and Nicole Mollison, said they would accept the offer as long as it had the money in hand by June 20.

Donors needed to make their pledges by June 18 for their contributions to clear and arrive in the council’s account by the closing deadline. “It came together quickly,” said Nancy Binzen, a communications consultant for the council. “We had very little time in which to reach our goal. We had about seven weeks.”

Most of the donations came from contributors in West Marin, but some came from as far away as Washington State and Colorado. “People don’t have that many opportunities to be part of something historic,” Ms. Binzen said. “And you’re in at the very beginning. That’s what made it particularly exciting to people.”

One anonymous donor gave \$200,000 to the cause, but most individual donations came in small sums. Among those who contributed were John Littleton and Rose Kaufman of Point Reyes Station. Mr. Littleton is a retired teacher and Ms. Kaufman is a retired psychologist. As soon as they learned about the fundraiser, Ms. Kaufman suggested they donate \$500. Mr. Littleton suggested they double that amount. They gave \$1,000. “It was a big leap for us,” Mr. Littleton said. “We’re living on retirement income, but this seemed like the right thing to do. We’re thrilled to hear that the deal is going through.”

Mr. Littleton has a longstanding interest in Native culture and used to participate in events at Kule Loklo, a reconstruction of a Coast Miwok village in the Point Reyes National Seashore. But the site has fallen into disrepair. The Nicasio property will allow the council to resume the classes and cultural programs once held there, he said.

“I was drawn to Native people who had been oppressed and disenfranchised,” Mr. Littleton said. “I was drawn to their spirituality and their connection with the land and the forces of nature.”

The Huukuiko, or Coast Miwok, culture revolves around family and land, with elaborate ceremonies and rituals of birth, initiation, marriage, and death. They have strong traditions of storytelling, singing and crafts and are known for weaving sturdy baskets that they adorned with plants, shells and feathers. They lived peacefully in Nicasio until the arrival of outsiders from Spain, Mexico and the United States between the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

With the purchase of the property, the Coast Miwok Tribal Council takes its place in a growing land-back movement that promotes restoring land ownership to Indigenous communities. Land returns have also been negotiated for California tribes in Oakland, Eureka, and Los Angeles and Mendocino Counties.

When the council announced its fundraising campaign, Mr. Sanchez wasn’t sure it would succeed. “It was touch and go,” he said. “It was a bit of a rollercoaster ride, but in the end the community came forward tremendously.”